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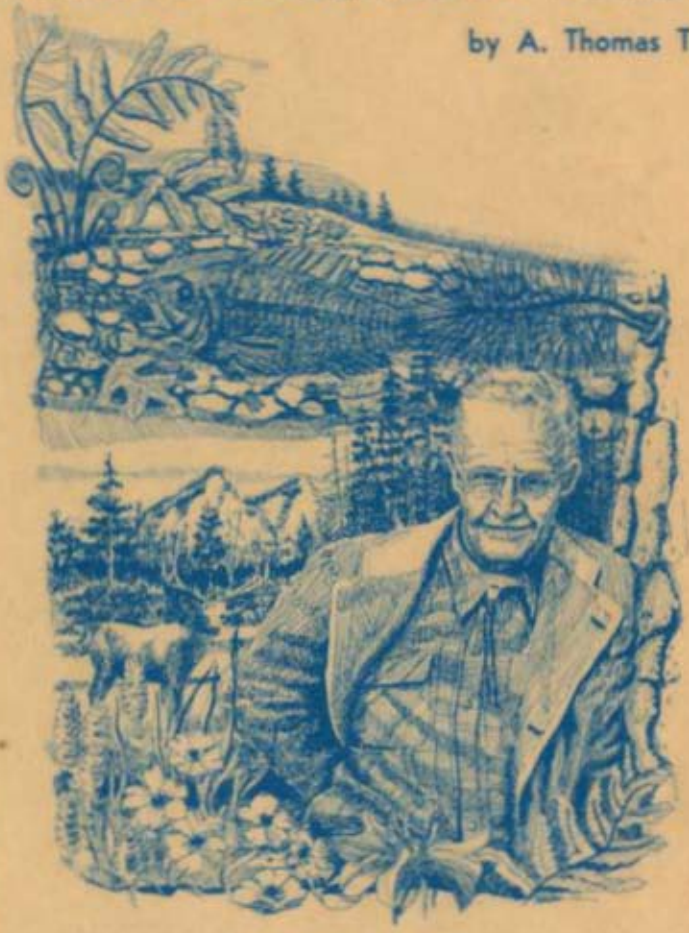
WESTERN WRITERS SERIES

No. 6

THOMAS HORNSBY FERRIL

by A. Thomas Trusky



BOISE STATE COLLEGE
BOISE, IDAHO

Boise State College Western Writers Series Number 6

Thomas Hornsby Ferril

By A. Thomas Trusky

Boise State College

Editors: Wayne Chatterton
James H. Maguire

Business Manager:
James Hadden

Boise State College, Boise, Idaho

Library of Congress Card No. 73-8335

International Standard Book No. 0-88430-005-6

Printed in the United States of America by
The Caxton Printers, Ltd.
Caldwell, Idaho

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Joseph Wood Krutch, in his celebrative essay "The Day of the Peepers," proposes a holiday to honor the common tree frog, *Hyla crucifer,* who indicates with its aristophanic croaking the coming of spring. Krutch concludes:

> Surely one day a year might be set aside on which to remember our ancient loyalties and to remember our ancient origins. And I know of none more suitable for that purpose than the Day of the Peepers. "Spring is come!" I say when I hear them, and: "The most ancient of Christs has risen!" But I also add something which, for me at least, is even more important. "Don't forget," I whisper to the peepers, "we are all in this together."

We do not know precisely when Mr. Krutch began whispering to our batrachian brothers (his essay was written in 1949), but we can be certain that in his desire to pay homage to our blood, our beginnings, and our shared futures, he has not been alone. These have been life-long themes in the work of Thomas Hornsby Ferril.

In contrast with Krutch, however, Thomas Hornsby Ferril is not a household word. That he is not well-known even in English Departments is unfortunate. Ferril deserves to be better known for his fifty years of literary activity, during which he has published five volumes of poetry, two collections of essays, numerous poems and prose pieces in leading periodicals, and, from 1939 to 1972 with his wife, edited and published the *Rocky*

Mountain Herald, a Denver weekly newspaper. Among the many honors he has won, most notable are the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award (1926), the Oscar Blumenthal Poetry Prize (1937), the Academy of American Poets Award (1939), the Ridgeley Torrence Memorial Award for the best book of poetry published the previous year (1953), the $10,000 Denver *Post* 1958 National Drama Competition, and, in 1960, the $1,000 Robert Frost Poetry Award. And yet he is seldom anthologized; with the exception of his recently reprinted *New & Selected Poems* and *High Passage,* his works are out of print. Knowledge of Ferril is limited to the immediate Rocky Mountain region and to a few critics and poets elsewhere who have discovered his work.

Ferril readers offer three major theories for his lack of popular renown: Ferril is a regional poet who somehow loses his appeal and power at sea-level; his verse is too scientific to be called "poetry" in the highest sense of that term; he is another victim of that Western bugaboo, the Eastern Literary Combine. Certain facts support these theories, for Ferril has spent most of his life in Colorado and many of his poems draw on the natural surroundings or history of the West. Too, Ferril's writing, which often makes use of scientific concepts and vocabulary, is proof that he is more than casually acquainted with geology and biology. And, if critics do a combine make, R. F. Richards' "The Poetry of Thomas Hornsby Ferril" supports the third theory: "He [Ferril] has not been rejected by the critics; he has been ignored" (p. 2).

This critical neglect is difficult to comprehend, since an appreciation of Ferril's writings quickly dispels any illusion that his are "mere" local colorings of the Wild West. In a typical Ferril poem, we find copious references to European and Oriental historical figures and events, allusions to myths and literature of all nations—inevitably drawn in meaningful relation to New World phenomena. (In his first *Harper's* essay, "Western Half-Acre," Ferril only half-humorously declines to define himself as

even being a Westerner or knowing precisely what one is, pointing out that the age one lives in and one's locale and interests determine the meaning of the term.) His poems are not paeans to cowpunchers or Colorado Podunks. The label "regional poet" is a misnomer, for Ferril's predominant theme is the aspirations of mankind-in-time; it has little relation to territory.

With his chosen theme, and writing in a region of impressive terrain, Ferril appropriately utilizes evolutionary theory and geological data. He explains his choice in the title essay of *I Hate Thursday*: "I find science and poetry antipodal and complementary, never competitive" (p. 7). Other essays included in this collection—"On Scientific Poetry" and "The Language of Science"—illuminate the harmonious relationships Ferril perceives between the Two Cultures. Scientific knowledge and language, as the few critics who have carefully inspected his verse have pointed out, act as a thematic complement to Ferril's poetic vision and insure that his depiction of landscape and Western history does not become mushy, romantic rhapsodizing.

Clearly, Ferril has been unjustifiably dismissed as a regional poet, a scientific writer, and has not had numerous or powerful critical mentors. However, these facts do not, even in concert, explain his obscurity. What then, is the reason for his lack of popular recognition? Most simply, it is the nature of Ferril's verse. Those qualities which are striking about his poetry, which set his voice apart from the voices of contemporary poets, are his epic vision and sense of history, his refusal to descend into the indulgent abyss of subjectivism, and what Richards says is Ferril's "latent emotion." These characteristics remove Ferril from the mainstream of modern poetry and critical regard; paradoxically, they are also the traits which account for his excellence.

Ferril prefers to make no comment on the topic of his literary reputation. His reticence, however, is not the cloistered disdain of Emily Dickinson ("How dreary—to be—Somebody!/How public—like a Frog—/To tell your name—the livelong June—/To

an admiring Bog!"). On the contrary, Ferril is most helpful in supplying biographers and critics with information about his life and work. Yet, he is too active to spend much time promoting or mourning his reputation. At 77, Ferril begins his workday, as he always has, at 5 a.m., present activities centering on his long-standing dramatic and musical concerns.

In 1952, Ferril's "Words for Time" was treated symphonically by the noted Denver composer Cecil Effinger, and it was performed as "Symphony for Chorus and Orchestra." Since that time, Effinger has composed five other works (two presently unpublished) based on Ferril poems. In "Music in the Poems of Thomas Hornsby Ferril," he has written of his admiration for his fellow Coloradan's verse, saying, "For me, the music in Ferril's poetry expresses a fine balance of the best qualities in the music of the past and of our time" (p. 66). Such praise indicates Ferril's congenial relationship with the composer. Future plans, according to the poet (Personal Letter, March 27, 1972), include an opera, a felicitous combination of Effinger's music with Ferril's dramatic verse.

The Ferril-Effinger opera should also benefit from the poet's long association with the theater. Ferril was drama critic for the Denver *Times* and *Rocky Mountain News* in the 1920's; and earlier, as a youth in Denver, he saw about three plays a week: "everything from the melodramas to Arthur Wing Pinero. . . . There was a lot of Shakespeare. I acted as a super, along with others from old East High School, and I carried the rubber grapes in the third act" (*University Park-Cherry Creek News,* November 2, 1972, p. 28). Long after such starring roles, Ferril began to write his own material. ". . . And Perhaps Happiness," an original three-act verse play in iambics, was awarded the $10,000 prize sponsored by the Denver *Post* and Colorado's Central City Opera House Association for a dramatic work based on the discovery of gold in that state. In the *Rocky Mountain Herald* (September 6, 1958), Ferril has chronicled the history of his

drama, telling how the play was selected from sixty-eight submitted anonymously in nationwide competition. "The author's aim," he states, "was poetic drama as distinguished from undertaking to write a play in verse. History and legend were treated arbitrarily. Vernacular idiom was employed," and, he concludes, "Published critical comment ranged from praise to ridicule" (p. 1). Explaining additional facts about the production in a personal letter (December 3, 1972), Ferril notes that the play the public saw differed considerably from his original version:

> Under terms of the competition, the play became the property of the Central City Opera House Association. Various committees, etc. tinkered with it, with some "doctoring" in New York and Hollywood, to the end that it got pretty much out of my control and, as produced, deviated from my original intent.
>
> Later, the Association transferred the copyright to me. I became owner of the play. Until I have time to pull it back to my original intent, I prefer not to make the script, as produced at Central City, available to anyone.

Before this dramatic venture, Ferril had written incidental plays for the Cactus Club of Denver. Along with his verse play, these have remained unpublished.

More prosaic concerns of Ferril relate to his 42-year employment at the Great Western Sugar Company, from which he retired as publicity director in 1968, and to his career in journalism.

Born in Denver, February 25, 1896, the son of Will C. and Alice M. Ferril, Thomas Hornsby Ferril was exposed to journalism as a boy. In 1912 his father purchased the *Rocky Mountain Herald* and published it until his death in 1939. After Thomas Hornsby graduated from East Denver High, received his B.A. from Colorado College (1918), and served as a sec-

ond lieutenant in the United States Army, he went through a quick succession of newspaper positions before finally returning to the family paper. His first job was working for the Denver *Times*: "I did everything from police beat to editorials. I was also writing a poem from time to time for the paper, usually an occasional poem about Christmas or Memorial Day" (Denver *Post,* May 12, 1971, p. 2AA). These early verses did not go unnoticed. Richard Le Gallienne, in his review of *Anthology of Newspaper Verse for 1921* in *The New York Times Book Review and Magazine* (September 3, 1922, pp. 6, 9) called Ferril "one of the youngest and best of the sons of the morning" (p. 6). Next, Ferril became a movie publicist in Denver. At the same time he began writing a poem a week for the *Rocky Mountain News*—and for the five dollars it brought in. This income, and the added responsibilities of marriage (in 1921 he had married Helen Drury Ray of Granville, Ohio), resulted in his attempts to secure half-time employment with the Great Western Sugar Company. These attempts were unsuccessful, and in 1926 he went to work full-time for the beet sugar concern. Yet he would not give up his writing; he recalls, "I kept my promise to myself—I spent at least half my time writing poetry" (*Post,* p. 2AA). In the same *Post* interview, Ferril relates how his daughter Anne (now artist, writer, and jewelry designer Mrs. MacGregor Folsom of Berkeley), when asked what her daddy did for a living, replied, "He is a poet but he works for the sugar company that we may eat." In this respect, Ferril is akin to two other leading poets of his generation who held unpoetical positions, the Hartford Insurance executive Wallace Stevens, and general practitioner William Carlos Williams. Even so, when we consider that in 1939 Ferril joined his wife in editing, publishing, and writing for the *Herald,* it is all the more amazing that he managed to raise a family, work "full time" at Great Western, and continue to write.

With the exception of his critical essays, most of Ferril's important prose has been written for the *Rocky Mountain Herald.*

Under the pseudonym of "Childe Herald" in the paper, Ferril has had freedom to exercise his considerable imagination, indulge his whims, and chat in country-editor style about public and private matters. It has not always been the easiest of positions, however:

> Recognition as a poet was coming my way and I liked it; and, since I write poetry very carefully, taking as much time as it takes to say what needs to be said, I was dismayed by the prospects that readers might identify me, the poet, with the irresponsible word-slinger doing a weekly column on the Herald under pressure to put deadline ideas together whether they made the slightest sense or not. I needed something to hide behind so I invented Childe Herald as author of my column. All I can say is, if you want to conceal your identity, never contrive a pseudonym. It nails you down to who you are more devastatingly than if you stood stark naked in public at high noon with loud speakers blaring your real name.
>
> (*Rocky Mountain Herald Reader,* p. viii)

The column is the *Herald*'s most famous feature. Bernard DeVoto wrote in *Harper's,* "It is by so far the best weekly column in contemporary journalism that there is no second place; the runner-up comes in third" (November 1952, p. 68).

Ferril is currently culling selections from the paper for his third collection of essays. The two previous, *Rocky Mountain Herald Reader* (William Morrow, 1966) and *I Hate Thursday* (Harper and Brothers, 1946), contain the informative and delightful pieces that *Herald* readers first saw in print. One of the most famous, often reprinted, appeared in the newspaper on September 10, 1955, in Childe Herald's "Ideas and Comments." In an ostensibly serious Freudian interpretation of a football game, Ferril describes the gridiron activities as "a religious rite sym-

bolizing the struggle to preserve the egg of life through the rigors of impending winter," where the egg is "symbolized by what is called 'the oval,' an inflated bladder covered with hog skin." So seriously he proclaims, "Football obviously arises out of the Oedipus complex. Love of mother dominates the entire ritual. The churches, without exception, are dedicated to Alma Mater, Dear Mother." What better proof in that the games begin "with colorful processions of musicians and semi-nude virgins who move in and out of ritualized patterns. This excites thousands of worshipers to rise from their seats," he reports, "shout frenzied poetry in unison and chant ecstatic anthems through which runs the Oedipus theme of willingness to die for love of Mother" (*Rocky Mountain Herald Reader,* pp. 1-2).

Sometimes the articles are more personal, containing information about the poet, Thomas Hornsby Ferril, as in the title essay of *I Hate Thursday* (on this day copy is due for Saturday's issue of the paper), or in the October 1944 extract, "Exploring the Dark Cellar." In the latter essay, similar in symbolic strategy to his best poems, Ferril takes us on a tour of his basement, where we are led to contemplate books "Pompeiian with fly ash from the new stoker," Western Americana, and, before we realize it, the history of western civilization.

James Fenimore Cooper; catching mesotrons; blacksmithing; limericks—all are fit topics for Childe Herald. One piece is saddening with its constant, terrible relevance: the July 24, 1943, column entitled "Wartime Service" tells of the "incessant bombers overhead," and asks, "What do Denver children think of these planes? It must be like the sound of a brook to a mountain child. If it ever stopped perhaps they couldn't sleep."

Other columns are "typically" Western in their humor or topic. Some appear to be sources, perhaps, for the fiction of Edward Abbey. Ferril's "Experimental Rabbit" (October 1943) is a prototype for the rabbit Abbey conveniently stones for meditation in *Desert Solitaire.* In "Afternoon of a Rattlesnake" (April 27,

1944) Ferril relates a story which we might well expect to find in Abbey: a friend tells of suddenly confronting a rattler:

> "Did you kill the snake?" I asked.
> "No."
> "Why not?"
> "I figured that someday he might bite somebody."
> (*I Hate Thursday,* p. 74)

Besides these essays, Ferril prints his own poetry when Childe Herald is unable to meet his deadline. With such journalistic verse he began his poetic career, his first published poem being "A Mountain Thought." Ferrill had sent this poem to an uncle who submitted it to the Auburn, New York, *Citizen,* where it was printed January 20, 1906. Of such verse, Ferril has written in *I Hate Thursday* ("Dorian Gray"), "Bad poetry, you may recall, must appear in book form—random newspaper absurdities can't qualify" (p. 195). In so doing he exonerates himself for much of the material he wrote for the *Times,* the *Rocky Mountain News,* and even, sometimes, for that which was printed in the *Herald.* His reputation should therefore rest on the quality of his five published volumes of "serious" verse.

Ferril's journalistic poetry comprises the contents of his 1926 volume, *High Passage.* As such, Ferril's first book is unimpressive, despite its being the twenty-second publication in the Yale Series of Younger Poets. The uneven quality of the poet's work appears in immaturity of both style and technique: blatant presentation of ideas or sentiments; flawed diction; heavy-handed rhyme, alliteration, and irony—and highly imitative verse.

From the first, we see Ferril's interest in mythologies. We hear his assertion that classical tales, though they may have Indian analogues, lack validity or force in Western America. To illustrate these ideas he frequently places Greek figures in New World settings. If skillfully handled, this juxtaposition might

convincingly create a parallel or a contrast for the religious and philosophical beliefs of the two regions, but too often in *High Passage* the effect is grotesque, unintentionally amusing, or unconvincing.

"Cowherd" is mechanical and unevocative in its juxtaposing of the West's mythical figure, the cowboy, with classical counterparts. The situation and description in Ferril's poem closely parallel a scene in Cather's *My Antonia* where a ten-year-old boy observes the Nebraska prairie:

> As I looked about me I felt the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running.

In "Cowherd," for the Homeric seas, we have "wine-red brush" and a pipe-smoking cowpoke who watches cattle grazing. Ferril concludes his poem by saying,

> Nor would it matter if the cattle were
> Apollo's with Prince Hermes singing by . . .
> Or even his, with all the sun and air
> And land that he could see against the sky,
> Though they are wandering prisoners, and he,
> But for himself upon the ground, is free.

The Homeric allusion in Cather is subtly, colorfully done, while in Ferril's poem it, and the classical deities, clunk disconcertingly about "Home on the Range."

"American Testament" interrogates the reader as to the influence of Daphne, Jason, Calypso, Niobe, or Diana upon the winning of the West. Ferril makes it clear that, actually, Amos, Ruth, Job, Ezra, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jude, Joel, Daniel, and Joshua

deserve the credit. The bluntly rhetorical questions that make up this academic twenty-line poem force us to conclude that our pioneer culture was shaped by Hebraic, not Hellenic, influences.

In "On Saving Time," we do not have mythological personages yoked to New World settings, but we are offered a comparison between six Pony Express riders and messengers of Ghengis Khan. The relationship seems more likely to have been drawn by captioneers for the *National Geographic*; in its romantic vagueness, the poem often becomes unintentionally funny. One of the Mongol riders tells of the death of his Eurasian sweetmeat named Golden Bells, describing the expression on her face the morning she died: *"And judging from her face at dawn she dreamed/Of nothing or a star."* Pretty fluff. The poem goes soft with such marshmallowy lines, and the comparison of "real" circuit riders with "poetic" Tatars is grotesque.

"Poetic" classical mythology and "romantic" figures are not the only devices used to "achieve" poetry in *High Passage,* for Ferril often relies on artificial diction, as in "Falling Leaves," where he writes, "in the earth/Swaying boughs begin to weave/ Green hymns of birth." Or we read the Shelleyan effusion in "October Aspens":

> What if the days be short
> And night comes soon,
> See, through the purple dusk, the aspen hill
> Is copper noon.

This kind of language appears in the frequent use of archaic forms like "o'er," "'twas," "'tis," and "whate'er" that riddle these poems.

More seriously, perhaps, the language is often verbose, vague, or cute. Padding can be discerned in the section "Threshold of Numbers" from the poem "October Aspens," where Ferril too obviously strains to complete the iambic hexameter, and in "Tro-

phy," where a man tells of discovering a mountain rams' skull, painted black, atop a willow pole. Such a skull may be related to Indian ritual, as Scherting suggests in "An Approach to the Western Poetry of Thomas Hornsby Ferril," but it seems more likely to be a blatant death symbol. In a simplistic mathematical computation, Ferril tells us, "It nibbled stars with half a jaw,/ With half a jaw it grinned"—this grin being directed at "The soil grown black with bones of things,/ Of trees and leaves, and many a skull." The unevocative "thing" and rhetorical "many a skull" aid in dissipating the effect of the poem.

"Prairie Schooner Child" is the one "cute" poem in the volume. It is the sort of newspaper verse to which "cultured" ladies of the West still thrill. Except in his last volume, Ferril is seldom more coy than when he describes a child seeing sagebrush as:

> Tiny oaks with twisted trunks,
> And leaves as thick as June,
> From which the prairie fairies peep
> Sometimes to see the moon.

High Passage poems, the work of an apprentice poet, are often imitative of the styles and subjects of other writers. Richards, in "The Poetry of Thomas Hornsby Ferril," notes the concern with the human and especially the American experience in *High Passage,* wryly remarking that Ferril's "literary cradle was rocked by Whitman" (p. 100). Most obviously, Ferril's allusive style is indebted to Eliot and Pound. His use of precise images, which Roe perceptively discusses in "Thomas Hornsby Ferril, Poet and Critic of the Rocky Mountain Region," aligns him with Pound's Imagists. In topic and treatment, *High Passage* poems often recall the works of Frost and Robinson.

We hear in the Frostian "Orientation" country-spun wisdoms of Western folk:

A mountain range must be just like a wall,
One side part time in shadow, one in light,
Or folks, he said, would not see it all,
Or dream of what it hid beyond their sight.

He told me that this mountain idea got
Mixed up with God and was hard to explain,
But that he thought he could recall a lot
About it if he should be sick again.

The speech and subject matter of "Ninety Miles East of the Range" also recall Frost, while the action portrayed in the poem parallels Robinson's "Luke Havergal" with a literal western gate:

Then quietly he told me that his wife
Was getting queer, and asked if it was strange
For one who lived on prairies all her life
To want a house where she could see the range.

He said she hummed around a lot and walked
At sundown through the gate and up the draw,
And watched the sun go down, but never talked
Much any more or told him what she saw. . . .

Other excerpts illustrate Ferril's attempt to master the technical aspects of poetry, as in the section entitled "Numb Harps," a tour de force in deliberate sound effects, from the poem "Moonset in Bayou Salade":

Now turn around,
Touch the horns of the moon,
Pink and brittle,

Feel, they are sharp
As the yucca that pricks
At the ivory bull,

Now touch the ground,
Pull a willow from June,
Bend it a little,

See, 'tis a harp,
Hear how it clicks,
Icily dull.

Irritating in *High Passage* is Ferril's habit of breaking his poems into "meaningfully" titled subsections. Too often these fragment the poem, unless we enjoy looking at every blackbird in thirteen ways. While Ferril performs other structural experimentation within traditional literary forms, notably the sonnet ("Old Maps to Oregon," "Cowherd," "The Uncut Page," "Bookmarks," "Science Came West," and "Bride"), those poems not in a traditional form often exhibit curiously eccentric sectioning and rhyme schemes ("One Mountain Hour," "On Saving Time," and "Morning River").

To this point in his career, Ferril's sins have been the venial ones of youth, of poetic naivete, and of the journalist who must meet verse deadlines. Yet, even in these flawed poems, we seldom see the "lies" which a local colorist can perpetrate, as in Arthur Chapman's "Out Where the West Begins." And there is a handful of poems in *High Passage* that demonstrate Ferril's mature talent: "High Passage," "Old Maps to Oregon," "Jupiter at Beer Springs," "The Empire Sofa," and "Science Came West" all deal with the heritage and history of the West in convincing, original ways.

The title poem of the volume is perhaps its best. To appreciate it fully, we may compare it with Richard Brautigan's poem "The Wheel" in *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster*. Knowing Ferril's "High Passage," we can better understand Brautigan's concentrated image poem—and Ferril's greatness. Though "American Testament" and "Cowherd" rather crudely

juxtaposed foreign images or allusions with those of the "uncivilized" New World, "High Passage" links the two through the flight of the poem's namesake, a bumblebee, an insect introduced by European settlers. The two-stanza form of the poem is admirable structurally, for in the first stanza it allows Ferril to present in vivid detail the English father and his son coming west; in the second, the natives: a Blackfoot girl, her mother, and a Ute boy. Admirable also is the lack of knowledge these unwitting participants in history display: we do not have a minor poet's characters who point at the bee and proclaim a symbol—nor do we have the phony ignorance or ironies of rustic folk who either do not know what they know, or know what they know but do not let on so! Ferril's first stanza goes:

What pure coincidences were the day the bee
Crossed the black river and came floating further West:
An old man felt no symbol streaming o'er his head,
But crushing English roses in his hunting vest
As if the flowers were there, spoke to his dusty son
Of this and that which he had written in his will,
And prattled on of England till the weary boy
Grew fearful of what lay behind each westering hill,
And watched horizons bobbing through the oxen horns,
Like circles screwed against his own identity,
Which thundered in his ears and through the wagon wheels
To roar beneath the silent passage of a bee.

The roses may be a patterned silk lining in the vest, pressed blooms (as Scherting asserts), or, more likely, the fading memories of a sedate English life amidst ordered gardens. It is a moving scene: the genteel gentleman seeking his fortune in a new land, forced to obliterate a now-irrelevant past (Browning's "Home-Thoughts, from Abroad" and the pith-helmeted colonials of Forster come to mind). The son wearies of his father's prattling

about the past, for the younger man is the new American, unconcerned that a heritage has been lost, that the future is enigma. Like the bee, the son is not interested in non-existent or unreal roses, only in the attainable prairie and mountain flowers that wait just over the horizon.

In the second stanza the young Blackfoot girl's attitude toward her mother neatly parallels that of the young man toward his father, and thus links the two sections:

The day the bee flew further West a Blackfoot girl
Laughed when her mother, mumbling of a buffalo bull,
Told of a maid that once a bull had wooed away;
Also that day a Ute boy topped a brown armful
Of wood with a gnarled snow-snake of the winter games,
Which now, in summer calm, could kindle evening fire;
So twilight fell across the world under the bee,
Whose flight sang down to peace, and while the moon rose higher,
The nodding prairie drowsed, for still unmeasured miles
Lay silent in the grass between the fires of those
Who trusting bulls would learn to fear a bee,
And lonely men remembering a droning rose.

The girl laughs as her mother, "mumbling of a buffalo bull,/Told of a maid that once a bull had wooed away." Ferril may be alluding to an actual Blackfoot myth, but he also brings to mind the Greek myth of Europa and Zeus, who wooed her as a white bull. The parallel attitudes have tragic implications, for as the boy should listen to the civilizing influence of his father, so the girl should regard her mother's words: the white youth is clearly linked with the mythic bull in lines 9 and 10. As domestic oxen will replace the wild buffalo, so white men will displace the Ute boy mentioned later in the poem and will woo (rape?) Indian women. The boy's future is his horizon: the Blackfoot girl who unknowingly awaits his arrival. Ferrill harmoniously utilizes Old

and New World myths to illustrate bonds of worlds brought together in the flight of the bee, the symbolic harbinger of the future.

We know that the Utes will be decimated, that the Blackfoot girl will be plundered as Western flora, that the old man will die a lonely anachronism. But during the few moments described in the poem, time is suspended. We are left to work out the implications of the scene. So it is with the better poems of *High Passage*. Unfortunately, not many poems in the volume are so competently, so movingly wrought.

In 1930 Ferril contributed "Rocky Mountain Metaphysics" to a collection of regional writings, *Folk-Say, A Regional Miscellany,* edited by B. A. Botkin. Although Ferril's essay is a major document in Western American poetics, indicating how the Western writer is to respond to his environment and what his themes should be, of equal importance are its relationships to Ferril's poetry. We may use Ferril-as-aesthetician to evaluate Ferril-as-poet. Alan Swallow writes of this essay and its author in "Two Rocky Mountain Poets":

> One good practice in criticizing poetry is to discover the poet's intention, the problem he has set for his own work. This practice is, of course, not a method for appraising the value of the finished poem, but it is a means to a fuller appreciation of the poem; and perhaps in the end will be of some importance in any final judgments attempted. (*Rocky Mountain Reader,* p. 418)

Ferril begins his essay by acknowledging the particular attractions which mountains, deserts, and canyons have for the Western artist, but he is quick to add, "Landscape is simply a static stage; it requires the movements of people, clouds, storms, the coming and going of vegetation, and most of all, human experi-

ence applied to these movements, if it is to be interesting in literature" (*Folk-Say,* p. 305). The problem, as Ferril sees it, is how to respond to purple mountains' majesty. Usually "The mountains suggest, more often dictate, speculation of the supernatural. They're likely to make you think about some god, often God, often some sheer abstraction which we might call Causation" (p. 306). The poems in *High Passage* illustrate Ferril's attempts to implicate gods or God in Western scenery and history; his second book of verse, *Westering* (1934), deals with the "sheer abstraction." We see in this second book, one of the most impressive single volumes in American poetry, Ferril's interest in science, whose causal explanations of the workings of the universe function for the poet as etiological myth. Science is shown to reveal the divine by delineating Causation, which Ferril views as a manifestation of the supernatural.

Ferril is not original when he writes of this manifestation, "The supernatural dominates the Western poet who approaches Nature directly" (p. 307), for we need only recall similar ideas in the writings of Transcendental essayists and poets, the Deistic authors—all of whom harken back through Paul's Epistles to the Romans (1:19-20) to earlier Platonic thought. We are not surprised, therefore, when we read of Ferril's description of a mountain "as a great wall behind which something is forever happening. It is mystical" (p. 307).

However, Ferril's mysticism is not the common Christian brand, for he states later in the essay: "the old religions are not ours; we no longer fear Nature in the same way [as did earlier men]" (p. 307). In the course of "Rocky Mountain Metaphysics" we realize that scientific reasoning is the New World faith which offers freedom from fear. Science provides, if not wisdom, at least knowledge about Nature; and knowing Nature is tantamount to knowing the supernatural. The task of the poet, therefore, is to accurately observe and portray Nature. In so doing he will reveal the divinity within it. This act of revelation, according

to Ferril, must not be done in artificial terms: "the supernatural must always be expressed naturally. Gods must not be abstract" (p. 307). And he concludes this section of his essay by remarking, "Some form of god-finding seems necessary in the West" (p. 309).

By calling for a metaphysical poetry based on observation of the external world, Ferril escapes "mere" local color poesy; god-finding is not a pursuit indigenous only to the Rocky Mountain region. Hence many of his poems have universal appeal and application. Too, the natural expression of the supernatural he calls for is, at least to some degree, aided by a scientific eye and vocabulary, although we should not only credit Ferril's interest in science, but we should also recall his journalistic career. Each may account for the economical and vivid use of language in his best work.

These ideas find their finest expression in *Westering,* published eight years after *High Passage* and four years after the *Folk-Say* essay. The title *Westering* is evocative, bringing to mind the movement of American pioneers, the struggle to survive in an untamed region, and the journey which is all our lives: the inevitable passage to an inevitable sunset. One or more of these meanings may appear in the best poems of the volume: "Time of Mountains," "Blue-Stemmed Grass," "Fort Laramie," "Kenosha Pass," and "Something Starting Over." Although "This Foreman" won *The Nation*'s poetry prize in 1927, it does not seem as impressive today as do these poems.

The first poem, the most ambitious and the best-realized, "Time of Mountains," tells of a person's following a canyon river and meditating on the physical processes of life. The speaker is walking on an old riverbed, looking at a literal river, thinking about the metaphorical "river of time" in which all things are swept up. He sees the fossilized imprints of ancient fish and contemplates their evolutionary voyage and his own from some dim primordial time in that sea of life which all rivers flow to

and from. Such thoughts illuminate the pageant of life, the order and design of flesh, and thereby reveal an overwhelming vision:

> So long ago my father led me to
> The dark impounded orders of this canyon,
> I have confused these rocks and waters with
> My life, but not unclearly, for I know
> What will be here when I am here no more.

He, "not unclearly," has "confused" his being with his surroundings, for as Ferril sees it, the paradox of existence is that while the individual must die, the physical stuff of which he is made survives. The Law of Conservation of Matter and Energy applies to all life. In this sense, things in the natural world imply divinity, for they may once have been alive (even human) though they are now inert; or perhaps these lifeless lumps of matter are destined to be touched by the spark of life. And the speaker tells us he recognizes these possibilities: "I've moved in the terrible cries of the prisoned water,/And prodigious stillness where the water folds/Its terrible muscles over and under each other." This understanding about the eternal, inevitable processes of existence brings some contentment:

> When you've walked a long time on the floor of a river,
> And up the steps and into the different rooms,
> You know where the hills are going, you can feel them,
> The far blue hills dissolving in luminous water,
> The solvent mountains going home to the oceans.

But seeing the river-revealed geologic ages, seeing past life-forms in their respective "rooms," is also disconcerting: "I stop to rest but the order still keeps moving." The speaker begins to realize the implications of his surroundings. He realizes that, although there is some solace in an ordered universe, he has little

control over the processes of time. From the inkling that the order is unstoppable, the persona suddenly becomes aware of his own certain death and his reintegration into the world of matter. Ferril writes in 11. 28-32:

> I mark how long it takes an aspen leaf
> To float in sight, pass me, and go downstream;
> I watch a willow dipping and springing back
> Like something that must be a water-clock,
> Measuring mine against the end of mountains.

Such epiphanies, of course, are not new to men. In his translation of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura,* entitled "No Single Thing Abides," W. H. Mallock records similar sentiments:

> No single thing abides, but all things flow.
> Fragment to fragment clings; the things thus grow
> Until we know and name them. By degrees
> They melt and are no more the things we know.
> Globed from the atoms falling slow or swift,
> I see the suns, I see the systems lift
> Their forms; and even the systems and the suns
> Shall go back slowly to the eternal drift.
> Thou too, O Earth, thine empires, lands, and seas,
> Least with thy stars of all the Galaxies,
> Globed from the drift like these. Like these, thou too
> Shalt go. Thou art going, hour by hour, like these.
> Nothing abides.

What consolation from these facts of fate? Lucretius would have us consider the general, not the specific: "Life lives on./It is the lives, the lives, the lives, that die." In *Song of Myself,* Whitman said much the same thing: "And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths,/ (No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)" And Whitman concludes in Section

50, "Do you see O my brothers and sisters?/It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness."

Ferril, however, is not content to merely appreciate cosmic symmetry or to rest in the assurance that life will continue after his death. His consolations are three-fold: he has the ability to view existence in the perspective of time and to comprehend the nature of things; too, his imagination and reason may order that reality (simultaneously perceiving *and* shaping the great design); and, finally, he appreciates the ability to comprehend life's meaning with reason and imagination, for they afford him a vision which allows him to transcend time. These three consolations form the triumphant conclusion to the poem:

> I, who have followed life up from the sea
> Into a black incision in this planet,
> Can bring an end to stone infinitives.
> I have held rivers to my eyes like lenses,
> And rearranged the mountains at my pleasure,
> As one might change the apples in a bowl,
> And I have walked a dim unearthly prairie
> From which these peaks have not yet blown away.

The metaphysical transport recorded in "Time of Mountains" is not as readily available in many of the other poems which constitute *Westering*. While cognizant of the physical processes of life, the other poems offer less vision, less solace. The images they present of life are more time-bound. For example, in "Fiftieth Birthday—1859," a tedious and overt poem, we read of Lincoln and Darwin who are linked because they have the same birthday. If the two were to meet, Ferril claims, Darwin would state: "there is no Design in Nature,/Not even Chance as gamblers use the word:/Only the Known, only the Undiscovered" (XI, 11. 4-6).

In other poems Ferril's harsh vision is mitigated by his color symbolism:

Kenosha Pass

You go in high gear to Kenosha summit:
That turquoise ocean lapping thirty peaks
Is hay now but the buffalo are dead.
The housing of your differential gears
Will break the gentians, but the Utes are dead.

"Kenosha Pass" is an unrelenting lament for things passing or past (gentian roots were used by the defunct Utes for medicinal purposes). However, we may discover some consolation in the tint of those fields and flowers if we recognize what the color blue means in *Westering*.

Purple, lavender, indigo, turquoise, and blue appear in more than two-thirds of the poems in Ferril's second volume, usually as adjectives describing flowers, grasses, mountains, or skies, which, in turn, usually relate to Ferril's metaphysical vision. Expressed simply, in blue, Ferril, like Mallarme, sees the realm of the supernatural. This color indicates the orders and cycles of eternal life. Consider the blue delphinium in "Fort Laramie," the blue hills in "Time of Mountains," or in "Jim Bridger," the "long blue tomb-song" for his body—which we learn does not die but is regenerated mythically as well as organically via history and art.

Gold is the color and substance diametrical to blue. It is in no way spiritual, but rather symbolic of earth-bound lust and greed, categorically and futilely this-world. Gold may appear in a poem which lacks its opposite, as in "All Years Are Odd as 1849," or it may be juxtaposed with blue, as in "Ghost Town" and, most obviously, in "Magenta." In at least one poem, "Fall Plowing," Ferril uses the color yellow in speaking of Autumn to signify death: "Trees on the hill are yellow and red,/Dig the grave deeper, summer is dead." The act of digging, mine shaft or grave, is to be associated with the color yellow. Miners neglect their wives and families in their greed for traces of the color ("Ghost

Town" and "Magenta"), or Americans forget the arts which offer a type of immortality analagous to that in blue—and in their short-sighted materialism suffer: "You are America, John Sutter,/Stand in your golden agony" ("All Years Are Odd as 1849," 11. 76-77).

The poems of *Westering* are also characterized by their tendency to conclude with floral imagery, as in "Fort Laramie," "Old Men On the Blue," "Kenosha Pass," "House in Denver," and "Waltz Against the Mountains." Whereas Poe thought the most poignant literary topic to be a beautiful woman expiring, Ferril seemingly delights in portraying a fragile blue bloom against the massive backdrop of a purple mountain, both passing away beneath an azure sky. These flowers may also be seen as the cultural blossoms of civilization caught in time (we recall Jeffers' imagery in "Shine, Perishing Republic"). In "Fort Laramie," one of Ferril's most successful poems, what was once open range, buffalo, and Indians, and what then became a bustling frontier settlement, is now nothing but flocks of mating pigeons and blue delphiniums growing through rotten planks. "Fort Laramie," Ferril writes in line 64, "is Nature now," as are the Western figures mentioned in the last stanza: Bill Sublette, Broken Hand, Bob Campbell, Jim Bridger, and Kit Carson:

> Dreamers, fighters, cowards, lovers,
> Here is a plank a blossom covers,
> Here is Wyoming walking in
> With a blue flower and a pigeon's wing.

In *Westering*, this motley of "Dreamers, fighters, cowards, lovers" serves as the West's divine pantheon. In Section III of "Rocky Mountain Metaphysics," Ferril notes that "Mountain gods, or any gods, are interesting if you dress them up and make them act like people, the way the Greeks and Navahos did" (p. 309). Serving as topics for roughly one-third of the poems in

the volume, these historical figures appear to function as New World gods, since the poet says:

> The formula for the West, a clear statement of the metaphysical principle by which man must meet Nature's measure, is the inscription on the California state capitol building: "Bring me men to match my mountains." (*Folk-Say*, p. 314)

Ferril brings many men and few women to match his mountains—Daniel Boone, Jim Bridger, John Colter, Sacagawea, and John Sutter for instance. And, though they have been dead only fifty to a hundred and twenty-five years, he would have us view them as divine: all are involved in "Westering." But for Ferril these are never merely explorers, for the mountains they climb, the rivers they embark on, are peculiar to his imagination. The landscape they penetrate is that of Ferril's vision, the region of paradoxically immortal physical processes. As such, these men and women are doomed to die but also—through the myths of men, as "living" characters in their arts, and as the biodegraded-yet-regenerated molecules which the speaker in "Time of Mountains" talks of—to be reborn. These figures are, then, godlike in their "immortality."

When we inspect the portrayal of these Western deities we comprehend the limitations of Ferril's art as well as his failure to realize the goals which he set down in "Rocky Mountain Metaphysics." Ferril himself admits in the essay that "the Westerner has forever been trying to correlate in his writing, not man with man—the great theme of literature—, but man with Nature" (p. 313). Unfortunately, it is Ferril's interest in science, the same interest which so radically altered his "poetic" style and freed it from that of his *High Passage* poems, which prohibits him from successfully dealing with what he has declared to be literature's great theme: relationships among men.

In viewing all things as subject to the physical laws of the universe, Ferril ironically reduces the stature of those men who meet his mountains. Blue-stemmed grass, Jim Bridger, Mount Massive—all are holy, all live, die, and are reborn—and are equal in their fitness for poetry. As Ferril flatly states in the concluding section (VI) of his 1930 essay,

> The Western artist must rediscover humanity. It is simple enough. Willa Cather has done it. Miss Cather merely insists that her people be more important than their background. (*Folk-Say,* p. 315)

But this artistic task is not so simple for Ferril. His characters are always symbols for the conveyance of an overriding idea or philosophical theme—they are always larger than life, not lifelike. We have no three-dimensional people in *Westering.* Few of them fart, perspire, make love, or engage in all the wonderfully trivial pursuits which characterize *Homo sapiens.*

The curious fact is that many of Ferril's poems are about dead people or the future, not about the now. Of course, this fact is understandable, in part, for his concerns are with history and science. He desires to resurrect the past and to show how it continues into the future: the myth, the man, the seasons, all are merely cycles and may recur. But his humans are so cold, so cold. Only in "Magenta" can Ferril muster much of the wit, wisdom, and humor we expect of living flesh and blood. And this is all the more ironic a compliment when we realize that Magenta is a mannikin.

We may ask why Ferril has not met his own criteria, inasmuch as his essay indicates that he has considerable insight into the task that faces the Western author. The answer may be that he was too keenly aware of the problems of the literature of the West and was too determined not to fall into the pitfall of the ooh-la-la of mountain greenery. He writes in the essay:

> One reason, I think, why the mountain country has been so effective in its demands is its insusceptibility to human revision, by which I mean that it is physically impossible for men to change materially the appearance of their surroundings. (*Folk-Say,* p. 315)

We can deduce two things from this comment: it was obviously written before condominiums defaced Colorado mountains, and, more important, Ferril is here indicating that only through imagination—often scientific interpretation of physical phenomena, in Ferril's case—may one transcend landscape. He managed the latter only too well.

The major redeeming purpose of such a reduction or shift in the perspective of human importance, is that Ferril, more than any other poet, actually does avoid the temptation to over-sentimentalize about the beauty of the West, and that he transmutes scientific beliefs into successful poetry. For these reasons alone *Westering* is a landmark in American literature. The Old World myths become scientific theory as evidenced in Western scenery —and all are equal as constructs of the human mind:

> There's something I am giving up to tell
> You this, and if you turn your head away
> When I say words like photo-synthesis,
> Can I say more than *Are we here or aren't we?*
> *Shall we turn back? Is there some other road?*
>
> O I will not forget the measured sagas
> Of older wayfaring across this world,
> We'll keep them too. We add to what they are.
> ("Fort Vasquez," ll. 107-114)

Myth, history, scientific theory, all are increments and interpretations of human experience: "Your dream," Darwin advises Lincoln in "Fiftieth Birthday—1859," "uncommon to the meadow

crickets,/Is Nature moving, and your words are Nature" (XI, 11. 12-13). Such sentiments may well sum up Ferril's view of man, who is separated, elevated, above mere beasts by his ability to imagine and dream. But at the same time (and this is the quality which so removes Ferril from the mainstream of modern poetry —and is the cause for critical neglect of his work), man is yet a part of Nature and therefore equal to all animate and inanimate things. He is subject, as they are, to time. Only this abstraction, Time, is permanent, according to Ferril in *Westering*. The world with its myriad life forms and scenery is engaging illusion, as he tells us in "Something Starting Over," which is the last poem in the collection:

I do not know how long forever is,
But today is going to be long long ago,
There will be flint to find, and chariot wheels,
And silver saxophones the angels played,
So I ask myself if I can still remember
How a myth began this morning and how the people
Seemed hardly to know that something was starting over.

While Ferril's vision may remove him from the mainstream of modern American verse, relying as it does on science, history, and the images of Western American landscape, its expression in *Westering* has resulted in poetry of the highest quality. Alan Swallow, writing in 1964, proclaims that *Westering* "is probably the best single volume to come from the belt of states along the Continental Divide" ("Poetry of the West," pp. 82-83). In full appreciation of Ferril's second volume, it does not seem preposterous to extend Swallow's claim to include the states on either side of the Divide.

Trial by Time (Harper & Brothers, 1944), however, is a disconcerting volume. The title poem and "Solstice" rank among Ferril's finest verse, while "The Prairie Melts," "The Long Di-

mension," "Life After Death," "Stem of Wheat," and "Tomorrow Is Too Plausible" are vintage Ferril. The latter poem, titled "The World of Tomorrow," was the official poem of the 1939 New York World's Fair—and a prize winner the same year in the Academy of American Poets competition.

"Solstice" tells of a man and his dog out walking on December 22nd:

> Orion sprawls like a bullfrog up December,
> The Star-Swan, winter-wounded, falls below
> The icy West.
> I'm cold!
> My dog is cold:
> The nostril cauterized, the frosty ear
> Cocked to the twang of tightening lake.

In the season of death, the living man feels he is trespassing, and yet he wonders, "Was there a sunflower ever?"—perhaps winter is eternal, there is no spring, no summer. What is real? he asks. The question is merely posed, not answered, as Ferril concludes in brilliant, terrifying lines: "My dog is cold, my dog is very cold,/Within my glove my finger is not mine." The images are of ice-clarity, and after these final phrases we cannot be numb with cold again in winter without recalling exactly who owns our chilled fingers!

"Trial by Time," although typically Ferrilian with its portrayal of the relationships and common fates of all earthly things, has an intensity which earlier Ferril poems lack. There is a sense of urgency and stridency as he writes:

> Out of the tide-slime
> Credulous we come,
> Singing our latest God stabbed and perfumed,
> Springing the eye of the enemy from the socket,

Building a ladder to a broken bird,
Meadow and mine to the pocket,
Dream to the word.

Out of the sluggard butcheries we come,
Cowering so at night in a white cold sweat,
Staring at hills and lovers,

. . . . .

Ferril views man as superior to the other beasts in the violent, epic journey from slime to sublime:

Yet strange with a fairer courage,
To us of all beasts given,
To meet with flaking hair and nostril numb
The ice-long ice-long dream of peace on earth,
Somewhere on earth,
Or peace in heaven.

In spite of our superiority, our "fairer courage," the search for peace appears as an "ice-long" dream that only *may* be found on earth. When we realize that the poem was written as the globe was erupting in World War II, we can see the reason for Ferril's limited optimism. However, he has begun his poem by saying, "Out of the old transgressions of the seas/We come,/. . ./ No prospect of an end." Ferril's vision of existence offers us a qualified faith, reaffirming the potential worth of mankind at a time when we might logically have greatest doubts. This is the trial by time which men have brought upon themselves, World War II; this is the long season of winter which is the topic of so many poems in Ferril's third volume.

Yet, readers may be disappointed with the total effect of *Trial by Time,* despite some poems of quality and craftsmanship equal to those of *Westering.* Many of the poems in the 1944 volume are outright failures, or deal with trivial topics in a trivial manner,

or fail to extend the poetic vision beyond realms already charted in Ferril's second book.

We are not only familiar with the man's poetic style and themes, but we also find that Ferril's 1937 essay, "Writing in the Rockies," is essentially a reworking of "Rocky Mountain Metaphysics" written seven years earlier. Published first in the *Saturday Review of Literature,* this second major essay by Ferril was reprinted in R. B. West's *Rocky Mountain Reader* in 1947. Many critics seem to assume it is the culmination of Ferril's poetic theory, failing to recognize that the earlier essay drew almost identical conclusions about the problems of the writer in the West and about the ways to triumph over them.

Ferril's essay and his third collection are, however, not absolute rehashings of prior work. In the final portion of "Writing in the Rockies" he introduces a new idea which he elaborated in many of the poems in *Trial by Time*: the role of the reporter in literature.

> I might close by suggesting that our most competent writing, with richest overtones, has always come from reporters: scribes with Coronado—after 1573 all Spanish expeditions were required to keep journals; from the scientists accompanying trappers up the Missouri and down the Columbia; the diarists of the wagon trails, the geologists; the topographers; the reporters, like Villard and Richardson who described the Pike's Peak gold rush. . . . Reporters were on the scene long before Shakespeare dipped his pen. (*Rocky Mountain Reader,* p. 402)

The paucity of poets in the West is a fact beyond dispute; as literary substitutes, Ferril would have us consider the scientific, journalistic, and historical diarists. The reason for his belief is that all these writers, like poets, deal with facts about environment to provide readers with insights into the world. Just

as, in past works, Ferril has made analogies between science, literature, and history, he now points to relationships among practitioners in these realms. Consider especially his essay, "The Artist as Prophet" in *I Hate Thursday,* written August 3, 1940, wherein he discusses the relativity of painter, poet, plumber, crooner, and filmmaker. And he says in his preface to *Trial by Time*: "I'm only suggesting that we might teach poetry backward. Begin with the lowest poetic impulses found in the newspaper, radio, advertisements and speeches of politicians" (p. xi). The verse in this third volume reflects these beliefs; and Ferril consciously utilizes them as subjects for his poems, seeking to elevate these baser poetic realms into higher poetry.

In the first poem of *Trial by Time*, "Noted," Ferril proclaims himself to be "Secretary to the stalks,/Wild blue lettuce, kinghead, yucca,/Sagebrush where my red mare walks." Nature dictates for her interviewers, as she did for the early Spanish explorers and others Ferril listed in "Writing in the Rockies." Ferril, and other poets, become "newspapermen."

In the preface of *Trial by Time* the concern which Ferril expresses about teaching poetry springs from his painful awareness of the power of language—be it the poet's verse, the public relation man's ad jingle, or the politician's propaganda—and of the potential misuse of the word:

> . . . the demagogue is only the very high and very perverse expression of the rudimentary poetic energies in every man. The art of Peter-the-Hermit is the art of Hitler. The Children's Crusade is ever with us. Patterns of words may not cause, but they precipitate, the patterns of shrapnel. You'd like to think that the young people of Germany, instead of believing Hitler's mouthings as facts, might have been so conditioned in recognition of figurative emotion as to turn from the radio saying "We prefer Goethe, he does it better." (*Trial by Time,* p. xiv)

In many of his poems, then, Ferril's concern is instructive. But while he tries to convey the "sluggard butcheries" of war, he is, unfortunately, not often equal to the task.

"Hippity-Hop" is an embarrassing bit of verse which crudely utilizes nursery and schoolyard rhymes to conclude, "*Ally-ally-outs when the town spurts blood.*" Another poem, "Progressive Education," is little better. Its title is ironic, and the first three stanzas tell of all the fantasies we teach our children ("picture-petal stories"), while the fourth stanza so subtly concludes the poem:

> Hurry off to school now, dear,
> Here's your coat and here's your hat,
> Here's your quinine, here's your plasma,
> Here's your bayonet.

Characteristically, Ferril is more adept at dealing with the past than with the immediate present. "The Civil War" is a successful poem, a dramatic monologue in which the speaker attempts to define the nature of a "civil" conflict. In the first stanza, the speaker sees war as a "picture in a book." The photograph he describes is perhaps an actual Brady print, although in the description of it there are said to be three trees (l. 3), rather too-convenient a symbolic display when we read the conclusion to the poem. After telling us how the Civil War has meaning for him (via Miss Colum, his history teacher, and his grandfather's Union Army uniform "smelling like parades"), the speaker comes to a new understanding of the word "civil" in the last stanza. Here he realizes that the Civil War is the personal conflict between good and evil. While for the narrator the North and South may represent these two polarities, the real battle, he decides, is the one waged within each person's soul. Wars are the manifestations of an evil that has already won over individuals. And so we have Miss Colum's advice to end the poem:

"Always be like Christ would like to have you/If your house burns up tonight and the firemen get there/After you've gone to heaven."

Poems that deal specifically with World War II comprise approximately one-fifth of the poems in *Trial by Time.* Generally, these are inferior Ferril, minor in comparison with the war poems of Jarrell, Cummings, Scott, or even Marianne Moore. Ferril's non-combatant status may explain his inability to convincingly portray the tragedies and horrors of war, and it may also account for the melodramatic profundity and unconvincing generality of a poem like "Planet Skin":

> Planet skin
> Is festering pink
> Where protoplasm
> Learned to think.

His elegy "To A Young Man Flying the Pacific," with its geographical references designed to add verisimilitude and create the illusion of lofty flight, rings hollow. Reindeer herders, Borneo, Burma, Singapore, China, and coral flowers—they are not made real for us in the convincing way that Ferril makes real a blade of blue-stemmed grass. The author knows what he is writing about when he speaks of mines and mountains; but his war poems seem an exercise in name-and-image dropping. We need only compare James Dickey's "The Firebombing" to perceive the artificiality of Ferril's poem.

Those war poems which are not total disasters are usually those in which Ferril writes about the land, its history, or past American figures. In his meditative sonnet, "No Mark," we are genuinely moved by the concluding couplet: "O swing away, white gull, white gull,/Evening star, be beautiful." We are touched because Ferril has realistically contrasted three memorialized historical figures whose graves are marked on land—

Casey Jones, Stonewall Jackson, and Custer—with an anonymous American airman shot from the sky into oblivion. The sonnet becomes a far more stirring monument for the airman than could any headstone or plaque.

Too, in "The Wars Are Different" (1932), his conclusion, although perhaps rhetorical, is nonetheless made effective by the imagery which precedes the final stanza:

> All the doors are opened wide,
> Some of the young men go outside
> To lie a while on the evening grass
> And watch the tallow planets pass,
> And some of the younger come to take
> Their places when they do not wake,
> Then all the elders come to weep
> To see so many boys asleep.
>
> *This is a different war* somebody said,
> But someone said *The wars are different*
> *But the young are dead.*

Ultimately, Ferril meets the destruction of war with a philosophy. And this tendency to philosophize may account for his ineptness as a war poet. We feel that, even had he seen a ball-turret gunner hosed from his plane, he would have immediately visualized the cellular breakdown and organic reconstruction of the airman. We feel that he would have reacted intellectually, not emotionally. Of course, such a reaction is a very human way of coping with brutal realities. But Ferril's philosophy, facing the madness of World War II, although consoling and visionary, is also limiting. How can we weep when death is not real, not the end? Literal distance and philosophic distance from the war prohibit Ferril from creating any truly great poems.

In each of the new areas explored in *Trial by Time*—journalism, education, and war—Ferril's poetic accomplishments are not

of the highest order. Often he is simply out of his element. He cannot make poetry out of his topic, or he is limited by his reading of the universe. As for the other poems in the volume which do not fall within these three categories, many are merely fragments of poems of brief ideas and images that appear to have been hastily jotted down ("Who Are the Cousins," "Harper's Ferry Floating Away," "White Petals," "Of All Generations Warring," and "For Kite"), while that most dreaded enemy of the Rocky Mountain dweller, local color, mars incidental poems like "Here Is a Land Where Life Is Written In Water" and "Sage."

Only when we read what we call a "Ferril poem" in *Trial by Time* are we satisfied. Only then do we nearly forget the other failures that fill the book. And even a Ferril poem stales after innumerable versions.

In 1953 Ferril's *New & Selected Poems* won the Ridgeley Torrence Memorial Award. Published in 1952, this volume includes only four poems from *High Passage,* nineteen from *Westering,* twenty-five from *Trial by Time,* and eleven new ones. Although the new poems illustrate Ferril's attempt to achieve what might, perhaps unfairly, be termed "more humane" verse, the structure of *New & Selected Poems* is Ferril's greatest achievement.

New & Selected Poems is divided into three parts: "The Long Dimension," "What Keeps on Moving?" and "American Testament," with eight of the new poems appearing in the second section. Part II is the major addition to the Ferril canon; the verse in this section is marked by an explicit sense of humanity that is new to Ferril's verse, the tortured poems of *Trial by Time* notwithstanding. Richards, in "The Poetry of Thomas Hornsby Ferril," points out that the title for this section was taken from "Waltz Against the Mountain" in *Westering,* with its recurring phrase, "What keeps on moving if your body stops?" He goes on to assert that the topic of this section "is the smaller span of time, a century instead of an ice age, the short dimension,

often merely a person's life. Therefore, it is often about people . . . , but the subject can be short time itself" (p. 229). As Richards has elsewhere claimed ("The Long Dimension of Ferril's Poetry"), time is Ferril's only consistent theme. But, although these poems of the second section are about Time, more important is Ferril's deliberate attempt to portray real people—not mere molecular configurations or historical ghosts. It is no accident that his most "human" poem to date, "Magenta," was selected for inclusion in this section.

In his earlier works, Ferril proclaimed man superior by virtue of his ability to perceive and create a transcending vision of existence. In "What Keeps on Moving?" he now proclaims the source for those "divine" abilities: the human heart. Love is the answer to the title-question of the section. Love is Ferril's new topic, and he sees it as a constant through the trials of the long winters he had written of in his third volume, a *raison d'etre* for men inextricably caught in the timeless journeys of *Westering*.

This "new" topic can be the affection found in Ferril's gently ironic lines of "Grandmother's Dear Old Friend," who is described as being "alert with wine" while recalling the past. Or, it may be the implicit warmth and sensuality in lines describing the youthful braggadocio and beauty of Denver youngsters riding their bicycles past the Ferril house on Downing Street, among whom we can imagine the poet himself as a boy:

> The boys strode up the lion ramps and down,
> They panted and they boasted and they rested
> Paler than lily-white Pollux, lily-white Castor,
> Handlebars under the trees like dappled antlers
> Pleaching the moods of maple to box-elder
>
> . . . . .
>
> ("Some of the Boys a Little
> While Had Names")

Usually, however, the emotion is more overtly stated. *"Where is my true love?"* the poet asks in "Out in the Stovepipe Mountains"; and in "Life After Death," he has found her:

> And I can tell you as a certain thing,
> Still while events within our muscles let
> Us swing an arm an arc of the horizon,
> That you will love me more for having told you
> To see what I have seen in natural men,
> In elms, in falcons, or in coats of horses;
> And I will love you more than beast or rock
> Can love you, or the dead can ever love you,
> . . . . .

Ferril here states that out of love he has poeticized the relationships between the living and the dead. Such a creative act, springing from the emotion, elevates man above mere rocks and beasts.

Love, as a force which empowers men to envision and create, is also a buffer against the harshness of the Long Dimension. "Rime of the Passion of the Carpenter" best displays this idea. Ferril's speaker tells of building a house for a woman he loves, and of dreaming:

> *The trees are burning through my hands,*
> *My fingers cannot hold the rope,*
> *There will be moonlight on your hair,*
> *There will be moonlight on your throat.*

Overcome with pride and anticipation, the man exclaims at the end of the poem:

> All is far . . .
> far sorrowing
> Away . . .
> away from everything

When a man's heart cries: *I make it so*
Because I love you, love you so.

This carpenter, who works in perhaps healthier fashion than Alan Dugan's in "Love Song: I and Thou," has built a house of love that will function as a refuge, keeping them safe from "ashes, politics,/Wars recited, candle-licks,/ Kings impending, panthers gutted,/ Treasure ebbing, psalms rebutted."

As we might expect, considering the theme of this second section, many poems talk of roses or contain images tinted by hues of red. This imagery is designed, obviously, to reinforce Ferril's topic, as in "Out in the Stovepipe Mountains," "Remembering a Red Brick Wall in Rennsselaer," and "Rime of the Passion of the Carpenter," all new poems. "That Afternoon," another new Ferril poem, concludes the second part with a picture of some great modern prime-mover, a pilot, god-like above the earth, tossing "a pond around a stone/To make concentric oceans circle in,/Undulating, interlocking, closing/Upon a point of winter like waves of roses."

We have been prepared for "What Keeps on Moving?" by a transitional poem at the conclusion of Part I. "This Trail," from *Westering*, provides the pathway from the initial section, which includes Ferril's most famous, most visionary poetry ("Trial by Time," "Time of Mountains," "Blue-Stemmed Grass"). With the breathy line, "This is no night for winding clocks. I love you," Ferril moves us into the realm of the heart, a world which supersedes cycles, clocks, and geologic ages.

Part III, "American Testament," includes poems which deal specifically with the New World experience, although they must be viewed in the context of the volume and in the light of Ferril's concept of the relationships and repetition inherent in all experiences. Such poems as "American Testament," "High Passage," "Jim Bridger," "Fort Vasquez," "Fort Laramie," "Words for Leadville," "Ghost Town," "Let Your Mind Wander Over

America," "House in Denver," "Harper's Ferry Floating Away," and "Nocturne at Noon—1605" are clearly chosen for their national and regional significance.

Drawing on approximately eighty percent of the verse from Ferril's previous three volumes, *New & Selected Poems* ultimately becomes a unified, epic poem. In Part I Ferril portrays the inexorable cycles of the "Long Dimension"; then he tempers them by insisting on the persistence and triumph of love in Part II. Part III is an exemplum: caught in Time, yet freed by Love, the American is shown Westering in the New World. *New & Selected Poems,* however, is not merely a testament of the Americas. The universality of its first two parts makes Ferril's fourth volume a testament of mankind.

Words for Denver (1966), published when Ferril was seventy, also attempts to achieve expanded meaning through a symbolic structuring. Presenting forty-four new poems in five sections, Ferril has sought to write a testament not of men but of their cities. In its own way, this is Ferril's elegiac *Aeneid,* without the poetry or the power of the Latin poet. Although Ferril deals with the personal and "humane" to a greater degree than in any of his previous volumes, his poetry is a sad regression to that of his earliest work. There are lapses in poetic diction, meaningless repetitions, tired themes and images. The structural intent of the collection is its most praiseworthy feature.

The title of the volume serves as the title for its first section, which consists of fourteen "books." Ferril begins in epic invocation manner, sans Muses, but with a question: "Tell me, beyond what ranges of the reasonable will/Does faring of a city quest?" The immediate reason for the query is the death of a "girl-child" at a construction-site sandpit. This is standard *in medias res* technique: the present tragedy provides the poet with an opportunity to inspect the founding of the city, to depict its settlers' aspirations, and to bring us up to date by asking whether Americans desire or deserve the urban world they have created. To

this end, Ferril concludes the first "book": *"Who was the child?/Where did her people come from?"*

The other thirteen "books" attempt to answer these questions with rhetoric, "local color," archaisms, snatches of "important" conversations, flashy lines (*"When is water?"*), and all the scientific and historical lore Ferril can invoke. Yet, little consolation for the "girl-child's" death is given by the fourteenth "book" (for this we must wait for the final poem in the volume, "Another Twilight"). In the fourteenth "book," "Reprise," the speaker and his dog Tip review the history of the land which was once prairie, Indian territory, and old Denver—now a cheap-tinseled world of supermarket and freeway. The speaker's resolution here, "ere" he dies, is more like a question. He wonders whether the people of Denver can appreciate the value and meaning of human life, whether anyone might be able to penetrate the insensitivity and commercializing lust which characterize the urban American. He concludes:

> So imminent is knocking on the door
> Or, without knocking,
> The door slow opening,
> Would they have listened
> Had some voice tried to tell them:
>
> *City of mine, try to be beautiful!*
>
> *Ever the longed-for light is rising*
> *On the mountains, O my city,*
> *Be patient, very patient,*
> *There is time?*

The second section of *Words for Denver,* "There Were Rails," explains how the populace of the first section arrived. Section three, "Begin Where You Are," depicts the arrival of the newcomers on foot and horseback to a world of arroyos, kildeers, and

loco-weed. This third section also contains the best poem in the volume:

Swallows

The prairie wind blew harder than it could,
Even the spines of cactus trembled back,
I crouched in an arroyo clamping my hands
On my eyes the sand was stinging yellow black.

In a break of the black I let my lashes part,
Looked overhead and saw I was not alone,
I could almost reach through the roar and almost touch
A treadmill of swallows almost holding their own.

As we might suspect, this cyclical vision of life will be the consolation in the Denver epic. Our suspicion is confirmed when we read the epigram from Lucretius in "The Children Are Coming Slowly Up the Stairs": "Motions of atoms which tend, then,/toward death and destruction can never/have victory always, nor bury existence forever."

We realize that the girl who died in the sandpit met the same fate we all must face: the proverbial dark at the top of the stairs. Of course, the journey up those stairs may be eventful. In the fourth section, "As Reported," we meet some interesting characters who apparently spice life: Lily Bull-Domingo, "The Man Who Thought He Was a Horse" (shades of James Wright!), "Eudora," and two Leadville children who amuse themselves by re-enacting the hanging of a dago with their little dollies.

Finally, in the last section, "New Path," we learn in the concluding poem, "Another Twilight," that existence is a never-ending cycle of birth-death-and-rebirth. Denver may become a seven-layered Ilium, its inhabitants the naked lovers who have "Lived and died,/Lived and died,/Lived and died." This is the consolation for the sandpit casualty.

If the message of *Words for Denver* is familiar, even though it

is a fusion of Lucretian and Virgilian poetry, so are the reasons for its failure. "Kildeer" begins "poetically": "Now do we see those birds that strut the quicksand," and relies, like so many other poems in the book, on unconvincing generalities: "There are myths, anxieties, hatreds . . . ," mere labels. "Kochia" recalls Ferril's earlier prairie-fairie poem, and "I Sawed a Log" recalls "October Aspens"—each from *High Passage.* In "These Planks" we hear the pitiful echo of the great "Fort Laramie," and "Making Purple" reminds us of an inferior "Blue-Stemmed Grass"—both from *Westering.* The repetition is frequent and dulling in *Words for Denver.* "Horn of Flowers" reads, "The luminous boy-child filled the hollow horn/With white white flowers,/The very whitest flowers,/. . ." And in "The Man Who Thought He Was a Horse," Ferril writes, "He was very very strong/And very very gentle,/. . ." Archaisms reappear. Instead of boys and girls, the children of *Words for Denver* are "boy-child" or "girl-child." Often Ferril shuffles a color chart before our eyes, as in "New Path," where the sunset is laboriously described as golden, salmon, and copper-saffron. In such instances Ferril seems to be compensating with Crayolas for lack of anything to say.

In a review of Ferril's book in *Western American Literature,* Nicholas Crome writes, "Further reading confirms the impression that the poet had no actual attitude toward his material, but simply discovered a variety of potential attitudes" (p. 244). Though Crome fails to recognize that Ferril was trying to write an epic of Denver, the discerning reader could probably agree with his conclusion that "only a slender sheaf of really splendid poems grew out of a genuine and original vision" (p. 244).

All in all, Ferril is reminiscent of one of David Wagoner's peepers in "The Poets Agree to be Quiet by the Swamp," who, knowing "What can be said has been said before," still cannot cease poeticizing. As Wagoner tells us: "the corners of their mouths grin past their hands./They stick their elbows out into

the evening,/Stoop, and begin the ancient croaking." Ferril, at 77, has plans for a sixth book of old and new verse, tentatively titled, *A Range of Poems.*

Regardless of its quality, Ferril's contributions to American literature are notable. His writings in the *Rocky Mountain Herald* have been widely admired and reprinted. His critical evaluations in "Rocky Mountain Metaphysics" of the problems the Western writer faces, and the solutions to those problems, are not yet invalid—or often heeded. His criticism, calling for a literature which focuses on man, transcends the regional concerns of the West and has universal relevance. Similarly, Ferril's poetry transcends "mere" local color verse. As Whitman had before him, Ferril has sought to portray the American experience. Moreover, he has sought to place that experience not only in the context of history but also in the dim eons before recorded time. To do so, Ferril has successfully made the Muses aware of the sciences. Of all modern versifiers, he alone felicitously manages transmutation of scientific to poetic fact. In these regards, *Westering,* his most impressive volume, stands out as a unique contribution to poetry.

Robert Frost, in a poem he once wrote to Ferril (reprinted on the cover of *New & Selected Poems*) stated:

> A man is as tall as his height
> Plus the height of his home town.
> I know a Denverite
> Who, measured from sea to crown,
> Is one mile five-foot-ten,
> And he swings a commensurate pen.

Considering Thomas Hornsby Ferril's varied literary achievements, one would find it difficult to disagree with Frost's estimation.

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